

JORMA KAUKONEN

THE FILLMORE

JUNE 23, 2002



(photo from Fur Peace Ranch, Ohio)

The Significant Other and I took in Jorma at the Fillmore Sunday night and came away with a definite mixture of feelings about the experience. To our astonishment, the ancient ballroom had been outfitted with wooden chairs and linen-draped tables which were served by a bevy of waitrons.

After ordering the Fillmore cheesesteak with Pale Sierra ale, a youngish feller took the stage with an f-hole archtop and mouth-harp frame. He launched into a fairly interesting set and was about 12 minutes into it before introducing himself as Scott Neil Diamond Miller. His dry, self-deprecating humor took some getting used to, but his flawless technique and unpretentious lyrics soon won the crowd over. He started with an engaging riff on every stage performer's major concern called "Are you with me?" and did a number of "new country" style originals, including a lively and wry "God damn the Sun". It's clear that the man is just starting out in the business and needs to learn a few things about stage presence, but his songs about users, losers and alcoholics are sincere and well crafted. Scott Miller is a name to watch for.

After a break, Jorma Kaukonen took the stage, accompanied by Sally van Meter on lapsteel and Jim on 8 string amplified mandolin.



This concert tour is in promotion of a concept CD released by Jorma through Sony Music on June 11th. The material is almost exclusively old-time bluegrass and pre-Atkins country blues and as such is fairly different from what JK usually does. Those pieces where Jorma absorbs the spirit of the original and completely revamps the melodic line according to his own distinctive style work the best. Those pieces where Jorma bows to the form of bluegrass, strangely enough, do not work as well, but come across as pristine museum pieces. Nice enough but devoid of passion or "spark".

Kaukonen is a master of his instrument, and of course anything he does will come across well enough, but he is not by any means a bluegrass player, for those guitarists tend to really work the left, fretting hand, while JK's style depends

heavily on right hand picking magic. It's worth noting by comparison, that Jerry Garcia, who had lost two right hand fingers in an industrial accident became known as quite an accomplished bluegrass picker before his death.

Sunday night the performance hit the highs where Jorma fell back on staples from his own songlist. Pieces like "Death Don't Have No Mercy," "Uncle Sam Blues", "Hesitation Blues" and "Good Shepherd" meld the best features of Jorma's playing style while still being strong enough in their own right to take some adaptation. Some of the best moments came during the four or five instrumental pieces, including the lyrical "Living in the Moment" and "A Life Well Lived". The lapsteel player did a mesmerizing solo about the area around Chico where she grew up, called "Into the Canyon."

It may be that the current taste for American "roots" music which the movie "Oh Brother Wherefore Art Thou" tapped into so successfully is part of the reason last night at the Fillmore got a little country-fied. His Grammy-nominated 2002 album, "Blue Country Heart" was widely acclaimed by critics as one of the definitive examples of American "Depression Era " music and features Kaukonen backed by an all-star Nashville bluegrass band. Or it may be that Jorma is simply exploring a little tributary that has always been at the base of things he has done. In any case, the man is certainly accomplished enough to roll with it and adapt.